The Non-GMO Project rises to forefront of natural food industry

Successful grassroots initiative to verify natural and organic foods as non-GMO gains backing of industry leaders, Whole Foods Market and United Natural Foods.

What started as an attempt by a California natural food store to verify the non-GMO status of food products it sells has blossomed into an industry-wide initiative backed by the US's largest natural food retailer and natural food distributor, as well as a growing number of other leading food manufacturers.

"Call to action"
"This is a call to action to eliminate GMOs from natural and organic products," said Michael Funk, president and chief executive officer of United Natural Foods.

Funk was one of several speakers who addressed an overflow crowd about the The Non-GMO Project at a meeting held at the recent Natural Products Expo West tradeshow in Anaheim, California.

"The increasing use of GMOs in conventional agriculture creates risk for organic and natural foods," said Megan Thompson, director of The Non-GMO Project. "The Non-GMO Project is a voluntary program enabling food manufacturers to establish systems for preventing GMO risk. It aims to provide technical support so that organic and natural food companies can provide can provide an alternative to GM food and thus meaningful choice for consumers."

Funk also said The Non-GMO Project will benefit consumers, assuring them that products contain no GMOs. "We need to protect the integrity of the organic food supply," he said.

Funk predicts that the natural and organic food industry will embrace the project. "We will ask for endorsements from the industry. This year we will make something happen," he said.

Thompson also emphasized now is the time for the industry to act, saying, "We welcome industry-wide representation in the project."

Jeffrey Smith, executive director of the Institute for Responsible Technology and author of recently published Genetic Roulette, said that his Campaign for Healthy Eating will aid The Non-GMO Project by providing consumer education about the importance of eating non-GMO foods. Smith said he plans to publish non-GMO shopping guides and install in-store kiosks with educational materials about the dangers of GM foods.

From one store to industry forefront
The Non-GMO Project is a case study in successful grassroots organizing to transform consumer concerns into positive industry change in the industry. In 2003 The Natural Grocery Co. in Berkeley, California, launched the "People Want to Know" campaign with the aim of organizing natural food retailers to persuade natural food companies to reveal the GMO status of their products. Growing to 161 natural food stores and cooperatives, the campaign became The Non-GMO Project in 2005, when FoodChain Global Advisors, an Iowa-based company with expertise in GMO controls and monitoring, was asked to provide technical assistance to verify the non-GMO status of products. Since then, The Non-GMO Project has steadily grown to include more than 300 natural food stores and cooperatives in the US and Canada.

Gaining critical mass, the project has risen in recent months to the forefront of the industry with the involvement of Whole Foods Markets and United Natural Foods, as well as participation from a growing number of manufacturers, including Straus Family Creamery, Eden Foods, and Lundberg Family Farms.

Pioneering non-GMO companies
Straus Family Creamery based in Marshall, California, was the first company to go through the non-GMO verification process (see page…). Company president Albert Straus encouraged others companies to participate. "Join me to make this a non-GMO industry," he said.

Straus discussed how GMO tests on organic corn used for feed revealed significant levels of GMO contamination and alerted him to the need for non-GMO verification. He said, "Hopefully, we can handle this (GMO risk) now, and everyone can join."

Two other organic food manufacturers, Eden Foods, based in Clinton, Michigan, and Lundberg Family Farms, based in Richvale, California, will also have their products non-GMO verified.

Eden president Michael Potter has been one of the organic industry's most outspoken leaders in addressing the GMO issues. "This has to be an important issue for the natural food industry. Monsanto and the FDA release this stuff, but we have to deal with it," he said.

Potter said The Non-GMO Project is overdue. "I'm hopeful that The Non-GMO Project will be an evolution to avoiding GMOs."

In an interview, Grant Lundberg, chief executive officer, Lundberg Family Farms, called The Non-GMO Project timely and said the natural and organic product industry has reached a point where it is ready to deal with GMOs on a practical level. "This is a recognition of the reality that GMOs are an issue and that we need to keep our products as pure as possible," he said.
Lundberg echoed what others said about the need to assure consumers. "This benefits consumers so they trust what we do."

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